

# *The Silverman Sentinel....*

Summer 2003

Issue #2



Welcome to the second issue of *The Silverman Sentinel*.

I hope you and your family are enjoying summer and the wealth of attractions Montgomery County has to offer—feast on a picnic in one of our parks, maybe the newly-opened Ridge Road Park in Germantown (also with a fenced-in dog exercise area); dance the night away at the restored Spanish Ballroom at Glen Echo Park or ride the famous Carousel; bring a blanket and go to the movies at the NIH outdoor Film Fest on the Strathmore Hall and American Speech-Language-Hearing Association lawns; or if cool indoors is your style, enjoy a classic film at the AFI Silver Theatre in downtown Silver Spring. Whatever your summer pleasure, I hope you'll take advantage of the attractions that make this County a special place to live and work.

For your summer reading, here are some highlights of actions here at the County Council and a preview of coming fall “attractions.”

In this issue:

- Budget Wrap Up
- A Place to Call Home
- Getting Down to Business
- Preview of Coming Attractions at Council
- Help a Child
- Quote of the Day

## **Budget Wrap Up**

Closing an estimated \$300 million budget gap required tough choices by the Council and Executive as we balanced a \$3 billion operating budget this spring. The State, facing its own fiscal problems, cut \$33 million in aid to Montgomery County. And, as one Councilmember noted, we endure the water torture fate of ‘drip, drip, drip’ in additional cuts from the State to come throughout the year.

One shoe dropped at the end of July with additional cuts in direct state aid to Montgomery and other counties; we wait for the other shoe to drop as the County feels the effects of cuts to state agencies, especially in health and human service areas. We may well see more people coming to our health clinics and more requests for help at the local level given State cutbacks.

This spring we struggled to reach a balanced approach of spending cuts while sustaining the County programs most needed by our residents. We preserved our progress to reduce class size in the early grades in 56 schools, as well as full-day kindergarten. We made a substantial down payment on traffic congestion relief with road projects moving forward in North Bethesda and Clarksburg, new bus service in the Shady Grove area, and pedestrian improvements and bike trails.

However, our residents and businesses *will* see cutbacks in services. Libraries will have fewer staff to assist patrons; we will not be able to hire all the police and fire personnel needed to replace officers who leave or retire; park visitors will need to carry out their trash because of reduced park maintenance staff; more of our vulnerable seniors will have to wait for home health services; and the list goes on. In addition, our employees will see lower than negotiated wages over the next year, resulting in almost \$20 million in savings. And, yes, we raised income, energy, and telephone taxes to fund key priorities. As I said last March at the beginning of our budget season, tax increases were a last choice, not a first choice. However, I became convinced they were the only way to sustain our key priorities, and I supported them as did an overwhelming majority of the Council. The overall budget passed unanimously.

Lean times are still ahead. Our work is cut out for us as we strive to meet our residents' expectations for high quality schools, libraries, parks, and public safety protection; help the most vulnerable of our community; and tackle the daunting task of traffic congestion relief. And we must meet these needs without an excessive tax burden on hard working families. A tall order!

## **A Place to Call Home**

A place to call home in Montgomery County is getting harder and harder to find. Home prices continue their upward climb as 2002 saw the **median** price for new single-family homes exceed **\$480,000!** Over the last five years housing costs have increased much more than wages—and unfortunately, there's no end in sight.

These astronomical home prices and high rents are pricing people out of Montgomery County and jeopardizing our economic health as our workforce cannot find affordable homes and apartments. It is especially hard for moderate and low-income families. A significant source of moderate-income housing has been the County's nationally recognized Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit (MPDU) program with 11,000 such homes and apartments built since the program began in 1976. However, with overall housing production slowing as the County matures from a land use perspective and has less open land for housing, fewer and fewer MPDUs have been built in recent years.

Despite the challenges, we are taking action on the affordable housing front.

- As part of the County budget, the Council approved \$16.1 million for the Housing Initiative Fund to build and rehab affordable housing;
- Some of those funds went toward an exciting initiative, conversion of a motel property to much-needed transitional housing for families leaving homeless shelters and efficiency

apartments for single adults. Work is underway to make this building, now called Seneca Heights, ready for families to move in at the beginning of 2004;

- On a much smaller scale, but nonetheless fortunate in a tight budget, I was pleased that the Council supported my proposal to provide \$40,000 in funding to the Jewish Foundation for Group Homes to renovate and repair their group homes for individuals with disabilities;
- Making it simpler to get approval for an accessory apartment is also a topic under review by the Council's Planning, Housing, and Economic Development Committee, which I chair. Staff from the Executive Branch and our Planning Department believe a streamlined approval process is feasible, and we anticipate a formal proposal in the fall. In this way families might have an easier time setting up a small apartment in their home for their elderly parents or for someone who can't afford to buy a home. Likewise, a family's ability to have a small apartment to rent to an individual might make the difference in helping them afford to buy a home.

## Getting Down to Business

This year my Council committee also has on its plate a series of Roundtables with different segments of the business community. The County's fiscal "health" depends on a strong and vibrant economy, and we want to hear from a variety of business owners and representatives about what specific actions the County should take. **So far, we have met with panels of biotechnology leaders, minority business owners, and small business owners.** Later this fall, we'll hear from members of our agricultural sector and then end with a Roundtable discussion with the nonprofit and cultural arts sectors.

Montgomery County is fortunate to have a wealth of thriving businesses. County government itself has provided support through the Economic Development Fund, incubator space to help "hatch" new businesses, workforce training through Montgomery College and the One Stop Workforce Center, as well as a host of other efforts. But, like Avis, we want to try harder and that is the purpose of these Roundtables.

## Preview of Coming Attractions

As the school year begins, the Council's fall work will also be underway. The major item on our agenda will be a top to bottom review of the **Annual Growth Policy**, the County's main policy document for spelling out how we attempt to match the pace of building new homes for families, and offices and stores for a strong economy with the provision of schools, roads, transit, and other public infrastructure needed to serve those families and our workforce. While our master plans determine *how many and where* those homes, offices, and stores will be, the Annual Growth Policy is about *when* the public infrastructure is sufficient for them to move forward. And, of course, government's fundamental responsibility is to make sure we build the schools, roads, transit, and other needed public facilities. Those decisions are made as part of our capital budget.

Decisions crucial to our County's future will be made as part of our actions on the Annual Growth Policy. Clearly, many schools are overcrowded and traffic congestion is gnawing away at our quality of life. We must and we will tackle the gridlock on the highways and the gridlock in the hallways.

At the same time, if we are going to be successful in tackling the affordable housing crisis highlighted earlier, we must make sure that there continues to be the opportunity for our residents and their sons and daughters to live in Montgomery County. That means a continuing, although modest, amount of new housing.

If we are going to remain successful as the home to thriving businesses and a strong economy, those businesses that grow and prosper must have a supply of new office and retail space in which to move.

Matching these often conflicting public goals is an enormous challenge. But that is the challenge before us this fall.

I hope you will engage in this vitally important debate. Let me and the other Councilmembers know your views. Testify at one of our public hearings on September 16 and 18, in the evening, here at the Council Office Building in Rockville. Contact me or my staff for further details at [Councilmember.Silverman@MontgomeryCountyMD.gov](mailto:Councilmember.Silverman@MontgomeryCountyMD.gov) or by calling us at 240-777-7960.

## **Help a Child**

Help make a difference in the life of a child. Ask your employer to join the "Passion for Learning Initiative" sponsored by the Montgomery County Business Roundtable for Education. This hands-on volunteer program engages businesses in learning partnerships with elementary schools impacted by poverty and involves tutoring students, classroom activities and other initiatives. Contact Cynthia Rubenstein at [p4learning@aol.com](mailto:p4learning@aol.com).

## **Quote of the Day**

*"Lord, Help Me Be the Person My Dog Thinks I am."*